

NEXT

edited by
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GREEN FIELDS

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Before he entered the room, Frank Fisher checked the contents of his satchel. Yes, everything was still in place: the rows of firecrackers and phosphorus pens; the lighters, water flasks and tape-player; the legal documents in their heat-proof plastic sleeve. All nice and neat and ready, just as they had been the last three times he looked. Even so, he took out a lighter and flicked it on briefly, testing the strength of the flame.

Swinging the satchel under his arm, he tried the Velcro fastening that fixed his rapier to his belt. Good and tight – but not so tight he couldn't instantly pull it free if an attack came. All was as it should be. He had everything he needed to survive.

Frank Fisher opened the door.

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The layout of the room was typical: it could have been a Standard-Class Room of Passing belonging to any of a dozen sects. The floor was smooth, pale wood, the walls matt white. A vase of lilies sat on a reproduction-marble plinth. Several plastic chairs had been arranged beneath the window.

The bed stood alone in the middle of the floor. Until recently it had evidently been surrounded by all the usual medical and devotional aids; the saline drips and heart monitors, the prayer-poles and little bureaux piled with route maps of the Other Side. Now, however, in preparation for the final moments, most of these had been wheeled away to cluster like grieving relatives a short distance from the bed.

Beyond the window, in the high air, seagulls soared. Pale winter light glinted on the cranes and dockyards across the river. The curtains had not been drawn.

Two men stood facing the window, looking up towards the sky. As Frank closed the door, they turned to meet him.

Frank said briskly: 'Frank Fisher, Thirteenth Hour Insurance Company. I guess you'll want to see my accreditation.'

The shorter of the two men nodded to his companion – a thin, pale-faced youth with sparse blond hair. 'Take a look, Benny.'

Benny came forward and unsmilingly examined

the laminate card that Frank held out. Like all employees of the House, he wore a bright-green jacket; in his case, it was just a little too large. The House logo was emblazoned on the lapels, and repeated in a decorative pattern on his tie. His skin was very white. Frank smelled incense hanging round him like a cloud.

The youth's gaze lifted from the card and slid accusingly across Frank's face without meeting his eyes. It dropped away again. 'All seems OK.'

'All right,' the short man said heartily. 'Thanks, Benny. And thank you for coming, Mr Fisher. You've made good time.'

With a roll of his shoulders he stepped forward to shake Frank's hand. Physically he reminded Frank of a cartoon dog from the old shows that ran on the secular entertainment channel – squat and top-heavy, with a broad, powerful torso and spindly legs that tapered fast to tiny patent-leather shoes. His emerald jacket was even brighter than Benny's, and decorated with gold brocade. His voice, his movements, his fine-cut clothes all exuded the same robust, almost brutal, confidence. He said, 'I'm Jeremiah Venal, Manager of the Green Fields House of Passing. As you know, this House is affiliated to the Sacred Brethren whose One Way Forward is the only true path.'

'Amen,' Benny said.

‘Can I ask you, Mr Fisher,’ Jeremiah Venal said, eyes winking like wet currants above the broadness of his smile, ‘to what sect or chapter do you personally belong?’

Frank ran his fingers through his hair, where sweat was already beading. Thanks to the fur lining of his coat, the room’s warmth discomfited him. Once, in the early days, he’d worn a long leather mac, which had been black and thin and cooler in every sense. Frank had far preferred it. Unfortunately it had been unsuited to the conditions Beyond, and he had nearly died. ‘I’m presently unconnected to any official church,’ he said. ‘That’s the way it has to be, I guess, if I’m to work independently like this.’ He moved towards the bed. ‘This is Mary Alice Evans? Looks like we haven’t got long. I’ll need to move all this prayer stuff further out of the way.’

‘If you’re not a priest,’ the blond youth growled, ‘you shouldn’t be allowed to use your Talent. How can you even think to cross—?’

‘That’ll do, Benny,’ Jeremiah Venal said. ‘Mr Fisher, this is, as you say, Mary Alice Evans, age ninety-seven and soon to pass over onto the next stage of her Journey. At such a time the manifold blessings of life boil rapidly away and we’re left with two melancholy facts: her body is failing, and she hasn’t paid a cent of spiritual insurance to an official

sect for thirty-two long years. Not a cent. That being so, we can do nothing further for her.'

The woman's shape showed as a low, bony ridge under the cotton blankets. She was lying on her back, quite still, except where the chest region fluttered with the rapid quiver of her breathing. Only her head and neck were visible, jutting from beneath the sheets like a dead, dry spur of driftwood. The eyes were closed, the toothless mouth gaped blackly. Spread across the pillows was a fan of bone-white hair.

'Poor old girl,' Frank said.

Jeremiah Venal made a clicking noise with his tongue. 'Here at Green Fields we strongly disapprove of anyone who is so cavalier with their preparations for the Other Side. Nevertheless, out of love and charity, we occasionally allow unfortunates who are not insured to pass their final hours with us. And, since we respect the principles of the Free Market, independent practitioners such as you *are* permitted access during the crossing. But in return we *do* expect an appropriate fee.'

Frank was watching the movement of the sheets. Her breaths were very uneven; sometimes loud and ragged, sometimes almost gone. 'Don't worry,' he said, swinging a desk of icons towards the wall, 'you'll get your cut. Twenty per cent. Standard.'

'I mean up front,' Jeremiah Venal said. 'You may come back with nothing.'

Frank looked at him. 'How much up front?'

'Five hundred pounds.'

Frank sucked in his cheeks. 'As you say, I may come back with nothing.'

Jeremiah Venal's smile broadened. 'If you're not happy, you can always leave. I called Floyd Winklebaum as well. You were faster, but he'll be in the foyer downstairs. He'd be delighted to step up and take your place.'

Frank sighed. 'No need. I'm happy.' He produced a crumpled wedge of notes and counted out the total. 'Now, I'll need some space. It's going to be soon.'

Jeremiah Venal folded the money and put it in his jacket pocket. 'Good, good. You do what you have to do. I'll leave you in Benny's capable hands.'

He departed, closing the door loudly. In the centre of the pillow, the dying woman's head jerked; she made an incomprehensible sound.

Frank went on a hasty circuit of the bed, wheeling the medical equipment further off, dragging the bureaux where they'd be safely out of range when the crucial moment came.

'Careful with those,' the blond boy warned.

'Got to be done,' Frank said. 'Wouldn't want me to trample your sacred road maps, would we?'

There was a silence. Frank finished clearing the necessary circle. He pulled a chair over from

the window and placed it six feet from the head end of the bed, side on to the woman. Then he switched on a single lamp, drew it closer so that the perimeter of its light fell in an arc across the bed, and closed the curtains. He sat heavily in the chair, sweat dripping from his brow. The tip of his rapier scraped against the floor.

‘I don’t like your tone,’ the youth said.

Frank ignored him. He was looking at the woman now; at the thin, dry arch of her neck, the skull lying heavy on the pillow. She was a thing of wax and bones, and the flame inside her was almost free. He noticed a stain at the corner of the gaping mouth, where someone at some time had tried giving her a nutrition drink. It was an old stain and the drink was long gone. He glanced around. Nor was there a glass of water anywhere. Goddamn Houses of Passing. They were all the same. Now she was going, they couldn’t care less.

Of course, it was true that in a little while things like thirst, pain and the disabilities of age would fall away from her like dropped cloth, and wouldn’t matter any more. But even so . . .

Frank fixed his eyes on the woman and tried to clear his mind, get his body ready for the transition. But all he could think about was the parched and open mouth. It distracted him, he couldn’t concentrate. ‘I think she needs some water,’ he said.

The blond youth had settled himself on a chair beside the window, and was peering out through a crack in the curtains. His voice was slightly muffled by the fabric. ‘What’s it like for you, then?’ he said. ‘On the Other Side. I’ve always wondered.’

‘You’ll see,’ Frank said. ‘One day.’

‘Oh, I know what it’ll be like for *me*,’ the youth went on. ‘I read the Brethren’s guidebooks, don’t I? I know all about the One True Way. I’ve memorised the path that’ll lead me straight through the Halls to those sweet green pastures. I mean, what’s it like *alive*? Going over, getting glimpses. What’s it like for you?’

‘Lonely,’ Frank said shortly. ‘Dangerous.’ He looked at the ravaged figure in the bed. ‘And necessary... Listen, she needs some water. Could you get some, please?’

‘Won’t be lonely or dangerous for me,’ the youth said. ‘I’ve been making regular payments to the Brethren all my life. *I’ll* be all right. If I live long enough to get Gold Standard cover, I’ll even have an escort. Music. Trumpets. Joyous Psalms being sung as I start to cross the Bridge. Only the truly blessed get all that. Yeah. I’m sorted. But some people don’t think ahead, do they? My view is, they’ve only got themselves to blame.’

Frank was well versed in the patterns of approaching death; he had noticed a subtle change in the

rhythm of the woman's breathing. 'Shut up,' he said. 'Go get her some water.'

The youth's voice altered. 'What did you say? You can't speak to me like that. Who do you think you are? I'll call Mr Venal, get you thrown out.'

'If you want him to lose his percentage,' Frank said, 'you go right ahead.' He sighed and stood up abruptly. Opening the flap of his satchel, he took out a flask. 'Don't bother yourself, Benny,' he said. 'You just sit tight. I'll see to it.'

Flicking the spout, he bent at the bedside, put his hand beneath her head. The hair was colourless like threads of glass, and so light he thought it might fall away between his fingers, but the skull was a dead-weight in his hand. He lifted her a little and eased a few drops of water onto her dry, grey tongue. The jaw moved; eyes shifted beneath translucent lids. The water ran back into the mouth. She couldn't swallow, but it was cool and pleasant for her, maybe. Frank gave her another few drops, waited to see she didn't choke, then lowered her head down.

'You oughtn't go near anyone who's ready to pass over,' the blond boy hissed. 'That's regulations. You could delay them, block their way.' He spoke softly, but there was something like hatred in his voice. 'Christ, an unbeliever like you. I ought to turf you out myself.' He got up from his chair.

Frank said easily, 'If you lay a hand on me,

I'll knock you through the wall.' He stowed the flask, sat down again, took a deep breath.

'You wouldn't,' the blond boy said. 'You're full of it. You're not a priest. I don't believe people like you go over at all. I hope an abandoned one gets you. I hope you lose your way. I hope you get lost on the endless stairs.'

He kept on talking, but Frank had already tuned him out. He sat very still now. He heard nothing save the faltering rhythm of the woman's breathing, saw nothing save her body on the bed and the way the lamplight fell on the sheets and pillow. When it happened, it would be very quick and subtle; he couldn't afford to miss it. He felt the familiar expectation beating against his heart, sudden and eager and full of fear.

She was stronger than he thought. She hung on for a long time. The day beyond the curtains waned, and the margins of the room had become a deep grey-blue when the lamplight on the bedclothes finally gave its tell-tale quiver. Close beside the bed something happened to the air. Frank saw a pale radiance break through, a narrow rectangular glimmer that shone on nothing. At once Mary Alice Evans sat up, peeled herself free of her mortal body; she swung her legs round and stood suddenly with her head tilted towards the light. She was very faint; even with his Talent, Frank could barely see her. For a moment she

paused as if in doubt, her posture hunched and twisted. The limitations of age had been left behind, but its hesitancy could not be instantly unlearned.

Still, she wasn't going to hang around. Frank Fisher had to act fast or she'd be gone.

He rose now and ran with the rapid silence of his Talent, his movement so soft and insubstantial that the youth slumped beside the window noticed nothing. In three strides Frank was at the bed; he reached the woman precisely as she began to walk towards the rectangle of light. Seamlessly, without breaking pace, he turned and followed. She sprang forward. He launched himself after her.

He stayed right behind Mary Alice Evans as she walked out of the world.

Somewhere in the streets below the Green Fields House of Passing came a yelp of drunken laughter. In the shadows of the curtains the blond youth yawned and scratched the back of his neck. The radiance was gone. Frank Fisher was gone. The woman's body lay like snakeskin, discarded in the centre of the bed.

No matter how Frank tried, he could never keep from closing his eyes. He never actually *saw* the moment of transition. So it was always the sharp drop in temperature that he experienced first – and only afterwards, as he forced himself to look, the familiar half-light of the Other Side.

To begin with, as always, his surroundings were nothing but a blur of muted colours, slowly moving, ever-changing. Presently, as always, they resolved themselves into solidity, and he found himself walking behind the woman in the great vistas of the Halls.

They were at a crossroad set between walls of broken brick, which here and there rose vertically to jagged points like teeth or ruined towers. Four paths led away from them. Other paths ran beyond the walls, connected at intervals by arches, gaps and flights of stairs. The ground was thick with red-grey dust, and covered with crisscross lines of footprints, layer upon layer, winding off in all directions through the soft, dark silence.

Frank shivered; even in his coat the air was very cold.

In some places, he knew, the maze entered covered regions, where passages diverged and reconnected under miles of arched brick ceiling. Here, however, there was no such shelter from what was above them.

Raising his eyes despite himself, Frank glimpsed the familiar impossible perspectives, saw the ground on which he stood curl upwards and away forever as if fixed to the inside of some monstrous sphere. Steadily, at first, it rose, with all its spreading paths and routes exposed upon it like a net of veins, then steeper, ever steeper until, at last, faint almost beyond perception, it disappeared cliff-like into the dimness. In places

irregular buttresses projected out horizontally above the appalling drop; on some of these were staircases, and minute figures in white walking slowly on them, climbing or descending, lost in their individual journeys through the Halls. And now, as Frank's eyes adjusted properly, he saw that all across the maze, up and down the endless slope, countless other flecks of white were moving – innumerable souls in transit, hunting for escape. Most were alone; a few – Frank could tell by the glints of colour – were accompanied by living priests in capes of gold or green.

As always in such moments, Frank's wits threatened to desert him. Hastily he shook himself free, forcing his mind back to small, controllable things. He tore a phosphorus pen from its holder within the satchel and made his first mark on the nearest flank of wall. The symbol gleamed on the brickwork, fixing his point of entry. Its familiar brightness reassured him. He had his Talent, his equipment and his experience – there was nothing else to fear! Time to get to work, do what he'd come to do. Gripping the hilt of his rapier tightly, he set off after Mary Alice Evans.

She was walking away from him along a path between the walls, her outline framed in the cool half-light. Already her posture had altered: the back was straighter, the hair perhaps a little darker. She moved with increasing speed.

Her bare feet left the faintest prints on the dusty ground. Frank's trainers delved deep furrows as he drew alongside.

Frank cleared his throat. 'Excuse me, Ms Evans?'

He had spoken softly, but even so his voice sounded harsh in the utter quiet. He cast a swift glance at the walls on either side. It would be rare for an abandoned one to find them so quickly, but certainly not impossible. 'Ms Evans?' he said again.

'Yes?' This time she noticed; she broke free of her reverie and turned to face him.

It always took him aback, always surprised Frank what those first moments would do. Particularly with the old ones: how the worn-out surface was transformed, how the built-up sediment of life's experience just dissolved away, leaving the person new. You started following an old woman and ended talking to a girl. It was disconcerting. The long nose was recognisably the same; everything else – the black hair in tresses, the full, wry lips, dark olive eyes, the clear, wide oval of her face – bore no resemblance to the body in the bed. She was taller than him and flushed with youth. Frank felt rather tired.

She said: 'You're not a priest, I hope? I didn't want a priest.'

Frank smiled winningly. 'I'm not a priest, Ms Evans. May I talk with you?'

Her gaze had flitted away from him; she was staring at the arching vaults above. Her face showed no terror, rather a quiet equanimity. ‘I suppose . . .’

‘Ms Evans, I’m grateful for your time. My name is Frank Fisher. I’m from the Thirteenth Hour Insurance Company. We noticed that at the time of your death you hadn’t paid your dues to any accredited spiritual organisation for many years. This means that you are alone and, shall we say, rudderless at what must be a very anxious time. But don’t worry, because it doesn’t have to be that way. I’m delighted to announce that I can offer you . . .’ His voice trailed off. She wasn’t listening; she was back to staring at the voids above them. Probably hadn’t heard a word he’d said.

Music might do it. That often worked. Cut through their self absorption.

Frank opened his satchel, pressed the button on the tape player. Instantly a tinny music-hall theme sounded, accompanied by jaunty lyrics.

*It’s not too late for guidance, it’s not too late for
cheer,*

*It’s not too late, though you’ve passed through the
gate,*

Salvation still is near.

*Ohhhh, take a little moment to adjust your bearing,
Though you’re dead there’s no need for swearing,*

*We're full of love and we're full of caring,
Thirteenth Hour is here.
Ohhhh, take a little look—*

‘Will you turn that racket off?’ the girl said.

Frank switched off the player. Instantly the vast silence swallowed them.

‘Jesus,’ the girl said. ‘I just *died*, and you play me that. What do you want?’

Frank spoke in a hurt voice. ‘The Thirteenth Hour theme tune provides comfort to many wandering souls.’

‘Not me,’ the girl said. ‘It gives me a headache.’

She was a feisty one; clearly it was going to be difficult. Frank sighed inwardly. He thought of the five hundred pounds he’d paid to get this far.

‘Just a couple of words, Ms Evans,’ he said. ‘Maybe you don’t realise it, but you’re in a very vulnerable post-death position. See, as I said before, you’re not covered by any spiritual insurance.’

The girl blew out her cheeks. ‘I guess I let it slide. I must’ve forgotten.’

Frank said, ‘You let your payments to the Way Made Manifest sect lapse thirty-two years ago, Ms Evans, and you’ve not taken up with anyone else. This “forgetfulness” means you’ve arrived here without help of any kind.’

She smiled then. ‘That’s all right. I’m OK.’

Frank shook his head. 'You're still acclimatising. I understand you might be a little confused.' He made a little rueful gesture at the ruined landscape. 'Look around you and consider. It's happened. You're here in the Halls. Now there's a long journey ahead if you're to ever reach the sweet Green Fields. It's a journey full of perils, Ms Evans, as I'm sure you know. Pits, labyrinths and wastes – and the abandoned ones hunting those who give up hope. And you've arrived without any guides, maps, relics or defences.'

'Yes, that was by choice,' the girl said. 'I didn't *want* a priest. Now, if you're—'

'Oh sure, the priests can't do everything they say,' Frank said. 'They don't know the One True Way. They can't get you all the way to the Bridge and Journey's End. No one can. But they *can* escort you for a while, get you used to the dangers, ward off pursuit.'

He glanced behind him instinctively, saw no shadows moving against the walls. 'I can do that too,' he said. 'I'm an experienced operator.' He tapped his rapier. 'And I'm armed.'

The girl was looking at him with new attention. 'Have I met you before?' she said. 'I recognise your voice...'

'I was in the room,' Frank said. 'When you passed over. That's how I'm with you now.'

The girl shrugged. ‘What precisely are you offering me, Mr...er, Fisher?’

‘Thirteenth Hour believe your lack of cover is due to honest oversight on your part,’ Frank said, ‘probably caused by senility on account of your advanced age. Don’t feel bad – it happens to many people. But it’s not too late. You’re dead, but I can accompany you for a while.’

‘No thanks,’ the girl said. ‘I’m content as I am, and I have no means of paying you. I appreciate the offer. Now, goodbye.’ With a gentle smile, she walked away to where two other paths diverged through arches in the walls. Without hesitation she took the left-hand way. Frank cursed under his breath. With his phosphorus pen he drew a hasty sign at the junction to mark his route and hurried after her.

The path descended down a flight of steps with high walls pressing on either side. The light there was muted; it was just the sort of place, Frank felt, where abandoned ones might lurk. He loosened the Velcro strapping at his belt. ‘Ms Evans, wait! You’re making a mistake. You *can* pay me – all you have to do is sign this paper here!’

This time, when she turned, her smile was gone. ‘I beg your pardon?’

Frank drew level, panting; the air on the Other Side was poor. He rummaged in his satchel, drew out the documents in their plastic folder. ‘It seems you left one

hundred thousand pounds in the bank,' he said. 'One hundred thousand pounds with no one to claim it. No family, no heirs. That fact buys you a lifeline, Ms Evans. If you sign this contract, bequeathing the full amount posthumously to Thirteenth Hour Insurance, I personally will give you immediate and invaluable assistance. I will escort you through this desolation as far as I can, warding off all dangers, guiding you until you're able to fend for yourself.' He took a deep breath, scanning the impassive face for clues. 'Think about it. You'll have a much better chance of ultimately reaching the Fields if I'm here to start you off. And all that money doesn't go to waste. Makes sense, doesn't it?' He smiled at her. 'What do you say?'

'I say...' The girl folded her arms. 'I say you've got a bloody cheek.'

Frank hesitated. 'Perhaps if I explained again—'

'No! Not another word! You followed me here trying to *sell* me something? You followed me *here*? You're worse than the priests!' Her dark eyes shone in the half-light; perhaps it was her anger, but her face seemed more beautiful than before. 'At least *they* give up hounding you when you die. *Selling* me something! And in *this* place...'

'But that's the point,' Frank began. 'This place is—'

She was off again, hurrying away without a backward glance. Likewise she utterly ignored the holes

and crevices in the walls on either side. Frank shook his head as he hurried after her. She was just the sort the abandoned ones liked; confused, proud and careless, drifting without purpose. Noisy too. He drew his rapier, and arranged his satchel so that his lighter and firecrackers were at his fingertips.

‘Ms Evans—’

‘Long ago,’ the girl said, stopping so suddenly he almost bumped into her, ‘I grew sick of people selling me assurances to use after death. Offering me road maps, teaching me songs to sing to guarantee safe passage – always contradicting each other, always swearing *they* knew the One True Path. You know what I realised, Mr Fisher? At its heart, it’s all about the money. And you’ve just proved it.’

It seemed to Frank that while she spoke he heard something, a little noise from elsewhere, half-hidden by her words. Scratching, shuffling? Hard to be sure, she was speaking so loudly. He stepped across to stand between her and the nearest wall, where a narrow fissure split the bricks in two. The cleft was dark and probably too tight for anything to squeeze through, but he kept it in the corner of his vision. ‘No,’ he said doggedly, ‘that’s not right. At least not always. Me being here is about your safety. It’s about me helping you to—’

‘I don’t *need* your help,’ the girl said. ‘Surely that’s perfectly obvious. I’m safe here. Now go away.’

‘Think carefully, Ms Evans. You’re making a hasty decision—’

‘Too right I am.’

‘And it’s a foolish one! You don’t know what you’re doing. Look around you—’

‘No, Mr Fisher. *You* look around!’ She raised her voice again; reverberations ran through the nearest bricks and away across the Halls. ‘Look around and tell me – what precisely is it that you fear?’

She glared at him: for a moment their eyes met. Then his gaze slid away, up and out across the infinite, curving vastness, where countless souls moved ant-like in their separate journeys... For a moment the terrible solitariness of existence on the Other Side pressed down upon him. He felt crushed by its weight, by its remorseless scale and silence. His head spun; he could hardly breathe.

In a small voice he said, ‘As well as guidance and protection, I’m offering temporary companionship after death. That’s no small thing. That’s what I’d want if it were me.’

When he looked again, the anger in her eyes had quieted a little. She said softly: ‘I quite understand. Thank you for the offer, Mr Fisher, but it’s not necessary for me.’

Frank’s shoulders slumped a little. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘OK.’ Closing his satchel, he fixed his rapier to his belt and wiped a hand across his brow. Despite the

cold, his face felt flushed. Five hundred pounds gone and nothing to show for it. But what could you do? You just couldn't tell; a person's character was a mystery until you got them on the Other Side. Some people wept at his feet, some thanked him like a brother. Mary Alice Evans told him to get lost. So it went. He reached for his water bottle, flicked up the spout and took a long drink. And now what? Just the pain of the journey home. Each time he stepped back, he felt worse afterwards. Like it was taking something out of him.

He stowed the bottle and turned to go. 'I'm sorry to have bothered you,' he said.

To his surprise the girl hadn't yet moved; she stood there, watching him.

'Back in the room,' she said, 'just before I died. Didn't you—?'

As she spoke, soft sounds came from the crevice by Frank's side. Even as he heard them, he knew he had been careless. Disappointment had made him drop his guard.

He threw himself backwards, landing awkwardly on one buttock in a cloud of dust, and thus narrowly avoiding the clasp of a hand that extended from the darkness of the cleft. It was a white hand that hung on the end of a long white arm; swiping vainly in midair, it dropped swiftly to the dust where it walked, questing on its fingers in little jerks and rushes like a

spider, closer and closer to Frank's outstretched leg. Frank gave a squeal, wrenched his rapier clear of his belt and, with an oath, brought it down onto the centre of the pale, thin wrist. Bone snapped in two; the arm jerked back. The severed hand lay on the ground, its fingers curling, flexing. Still sitting on his bottom in the dust, Frank snared it with the tip of his rapier and flicked it quickly upwards and away into the darkness of the cleft.

Somewhere close by came an angry gnashing of teeth. A shadow moved beyond the bricks. Frank dropped the rapier, got to his feet, took his lighter and a firecracker from his bag. He lit the firecracker and, with a practised movement, threw it into the hole. There was a flash of phosphorus and a plaintive wailing. Then there was silence. Frank stood with another firecracker ready, eyes scanning the walls around. Nothing moved.

Presently he relaxed. The usual sense of grim exultation surged in him. He picked up his rapier and wiped the tip through the thick grey dust.

'Mr Fisher.'

The girl was standing as before, gazing at him without expression.

'Pass me the paper,' she said. 'I've changed my mind. I'll sign the contract, give you the money.'

Well, it was only natural after what had happened. 'You've made a wise choice to stick with me,'

Frank said, wiping his brow. 'Just let me find my pen.'

He located the biro in its neat compartment. Mary Alice Evans took it and wrote her signature at the bottom of the paper. Her style was slightly ornate and fussy: an old woman's hand.

She put the top on the pen and handed it back. 'There. Will that do?'

Frank nodded. 'Perfect. It'll stand up nicely in a court of law.'

'That's fine,' she said. 'Well, goodbye.'

Frank Fisher stared at her. 'What do you mean? Don't you understand? I'm coming with you.'

'No, you're not,' the girl said. 'I never agreed to that. I just said I'd give you the money. That's what you wanted, isn't it?'

He frowned. 'Yes, but...clearly you need my protection.'

When she smiled she looked younger than ever, practically a child. 'That's not why I signed your precious bit of paper, Mr Fisher. I signed because I suddenly remembered what you did for me.'

There was a pause. Frank said, 'You mean just now? When the abandoned—'

'No. You gave me a drink, don't *you* remember? Back in the last place. You cradled my head and gave me water. You gave me comfort. For *that* I'm giving you the money. And now I'm going on – alone.'

It seemed to Frank that he was missing something. The side of his skull ached. He rubbed his hand across his temple. ‘Well, of course,’ he said, ‘I remember. But that was just a little thing, and I’m talking about the dangers facing you *now*. The abandoned ones are on your scent already. They follow anyone who’s lost, who’s drifting without purpose. They’ve already attacked you.’

‘No, Mr Fisher, they attacked *you*.’ The girl’s smile broadened. ‘I didn’t see them.’

‘*What?* But it was right there!’ He waved his hand behind him at the wall.

‘Maybe for you.’ There was laughter in her eyes: it angered and confused him all at once. ‘It wasn’t real for me,’ she said. ‘I didn’t see any monsters. I just saw you yelling and waving your sword about – after falling on your backside in the grass.’

‘You must have seen it!’ Frank said. ‘I know it happened fast, but—’ He hesitated. It had taken a moment for the meaning of the word to get through to him. ‘Grass?’ he said.

‘We’re standing in it now.’ Mary Alice Evans gestured all around. ‘Do you not see it, Mr Fisher? Don’t you feel it beneath your feet?’

He found himself staring stupidly down at the dust and stones of the arid ground. ‘Of course not. What do you mean? There’s no grass among the walls.’

‘Maybe,’ the girl said. ‘But then, I can’t see the walls, either.’

She was looking past him at something, her eyes glistening with reflected light.

Almost eagerly, Frank followed her gaze – but all he saw was the barren labyrinth rising endlessly ahead. He looked away.

‘Oh dear,’ the girl said. ‘I’m sorry for you. Perhaps it does mean something to be dead after all.’

Frank said, ‘But...but we’re in the Halls, Ms Evans. Everyone starts—’

‘Everyone’s different, Mr Fisher. For me it’s been the Green Fields since the moment I died.’ Her smile now was very beautiful; its radiance wounded him. ‘And I’m looking forward to my journey through them, however long it takes. Goodbye, Mr Fisher. Thank you again for being so kind to me. I hope someone someday does the same for you.’

She waved, and walked away along the path. Presently she came to a junction, turned aside and was gone. Frank Fisher gazed after her, the contract hanging limply in his hand. Then he spun steadily on his heels, looking round him at the tight brick walls that sealed him in, at the infinite tracts of pathways up above.

He closed his eyes...and quickly opened them. Did he see a flash of green?

No. He couldn’t say he did.

Frank Fisher took a long, deep breath. He stowed the documents and pen carefully back in his satchel. He checked the firecrackers and phosphorus pens. He tried the compartments . . . Yes, everything nice and neat, ready for when he needed them again.

Closing the flap, he drew himself up and, with his hand on the hilt of his rapier, began slowly to retrace his painful way back to the mortal world.

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